

## **POL 485H1F Section L0101: Topics in Political Theory II**

### **Plagues in Political Thought**

**Fall 2019**

**Wednesdays, 10 a.m.-12 p.m.**

**Earth Sciences Building, Room 1016M**

#### **Instructor:**

Emily Nacol  
Department of Political Science  
Email: emily.nacol@utoronto.ca  
Office: Sidney Smith 3122  
Office Hours: Wednesdays, 1:00-2:30 pm (or by appointment)

#### **Description:**

This course focuses broadly on the problem of plague in political thinking and writing. As the social historian Paul Slack notes in his *Plague: A Very Short Introduction*, “Everyone knows something about plague.” We may recognize it as a particular disease that wiped out populations in the historical past, a descriptor meant to capture a range of pandemics, or as a metaphor used to describe all manner of unwanted risks and disasters. It has captured the public imagination, and the major contention of this course is that reading plague discourse helps us focus on important political phenomena and questions generated by epidemiological events.

Three novels and one film form the core of this course: Daniel Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), Albert Camus’ *The Plague* (1947), José Saramago’s *Blindness* (1997), and Danny Boyle’s *28 Days Later* (2002). To frame our analyses of these fictional representations of outbreaks as works of political thought, we will draw upon relevant social theory from Michel Foucault, Mary Douglas, and René Girard.

Together, we will approach a series of critical questions raised by plague literature, questions that deserve the attention of political theorists. How does plague literature help us understand a politics of risk? Under conditions of epidemiological disaster, how do communities assign responsibility or blame for unfolding events? What do their distinctive choices teach us about the dynamics of political communities under duress? Which approaches preserve community, and which contribute to its breakdown? How do the knowledge problems generated by plague give way to new political problems or exacerbate long-standing ones, particularly when it comes to authority and governance? And lastly, is plague or contagion a useful metaphor for understanding social, political, and economic disasters? What gives it force and meaning, other than its visceral power?

## Requirements and Grading:

### Book List:

The books below are available in the bookstore, or you can borrow them from the Robarts or Pratt libraries, where they are on reserve.

### Required texts:

- Albert Camus, *The Plague* (Vintage Books).
- Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year* (Penguin Books).
- Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-1978* (Picador Press).
- José Saramago, *Blindness* (Harvest Books).
- Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* (Picador Press).
- Priscilla Wald, *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative* (Duke UP).

### Recommended texts:

- Paul Slack, *Plague: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford UP)

Please acquire and use *these* editions if possible, since class discussion will run much more smoothly if we are all using the same versions of the texts.

### Course Requirements and Grade Distribution:

This class is a seminar, so we will spend nearly all of our time discussing the readings. Your questions and comments will structure our discussions, so please come prepared for each class with at least one question or comment that you would like for us to think about as a group. Sometimes I will ask us to work through a difficult problem or question in the readings, but for the most part your concerns will drive our work.

The other component of your work for this seminar is writing. I will ask you to hand in short reflections on readings over the course of the semester. There will also be a take-home midterm paper and a final paper on either a circulated prompt or a question of your own design.

### **There are four graded components for this course:**

- Class attendance and participation
  - Bring texts to class
  - Do the reading in advance
  - Be an engaged listener (This means no smartphones!)
  - Participate in discussion
- 5 short reflection papers on readings, one single-spaced page each
- Take-home midterm of 8-10 pages (or 2400-3000 words)
- Final essay of 12-15 pages (or 3600-4500 words)

### **The grading breakdown is as follows:**

- Seminar attendance and participation: 20%
- 5 response papers for readings: 4% each, for 20% total (Full credit or no credit)
- Take-home midterm: 25%
- Final Essay: 35%

### Class attendance policy

Attendance is mandatory and an important part of the seminar experience. That said, I understand that things happen that make it impossible to attend class sometimes. For this reason, each of you can have one “free” absence, no questions asked. Any missed classes beyond that will affect your participation grade, unless you provide a documented reason for missing seminar.

### Late work policy

I will deduct **3%** from your grade for each 24 hours that your assignment is late. No work will be accepted after one week past the deadline.

I do not grant extensions except in cases of emergency, and then only to students who present official documentation that I can verify. Acceptable documentation includes a note from your doctor, a note from the registrar’s office, or a note from your AccessAbility advisor. Without official documentation from you, I will not grant an extension.

### Plagiarism

Plagiarism is unacceptable, and I report all suspected cases via the process outlined on the last page of this course outline. If you are not sure whether something counts as plagiarism, please don’t hesitate to ask me.

### Laptop Policy

Unless you have a documented reason for using a laptop or tablet during our seminar, I ask that you power down all your electronic equipment.

## **Student Resources and Support**

Your success in this course is important to me. Here are some resources I hope you will use if ever you need them:

### Accessibility:

Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. In particular, if you have a disability/health consideration that may require accommodations, please feel free to approach Dr. Nacol /or Accessibility Services as soon as possible.

The staff members of Accessibility Services (Located at 455 Spadina Avenue, 4<sup>th</sup> Floor, Suite 400) are available by appointment to assess specific needs, provide referrals, and arrange appropriate accommodations. Please call 416-978-8060 or email [accessibility.services@utoronto.ca](mailto:accessibility.services@utoronto.ca).

The sooner you let me know what you need, the sooner I can assist you in achieving your learning goals in this course.

### Notice of Collection:

The University of Toronto respects your privacy. The information on medication certificates is collected pursuant to section 2(14) of the University of Toronto Act, 1971. It is collected for the purpose of administering accommodations for academic purposes based on medical grounds. The department will maintain a record of all medical certificates received. At all times it will be protected in accordance with the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act.

If you have questions, please refer to [www.utoronto.ca/privacy](http://www.utoronto.ca/privacy) or contact the University's Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Office at 416-946-5835. Address: Room 201, McMurrich Bldg., 12 Queen's Park Crescent, Toronto, ON M5S 1A1.

### **Assignments:**

**Short Response Papers:** You must complete five 1-page response papers this term. On the first day, I will divide you into two groups (A & B) and you'll write response papers for the weeks designated for your group on the syllabus. These papers are due by 5:00 p.m. on Tuesday evening before our Wednesday class meeting. **NB:** There will be no opportunity to make up these assignments if you miss a deadline.

These papers have no strict guidelines except one: Please do not summarize the readings. You can assume that your reader has read the texts and has a working understanding of their major points and arguments. Instead, use this assignment as an opportunity to raise an interesting question, puzzle, or criticism about the reading. I may refer to your response paper to guide our class discussion the next day, too, so think of this as an opportunity to help set our agenda.

**Midterm Exam:** The midterm will be a take-home, open book/note exam. I will email you an essay question on **Friday, 11 October by 5:00 p.m.** You will have one week to compose your answer, so it will be due back to me on **Friday, 18 October at 5:00 p.m.** You may draw from your notes and the readings to answer the question, with no outside sources expected or required. Your response should be between 2400-3000 words (8-10 double-spaced pages), and it should take the form of an argument with a thesis statement, supported by evidence from the texts.

**Final Paper:** Your final essay should be about 3600-4500 words (12-15 double-spaced pages). I will circulate a selection of prompts on Quercus by **13 November**. You may choose one of them, or you may write on any question or problem you wish, provided that you clear the topic with me first. You may also bring in outside source materials for this paper, although this is not required. **The completed seminar paper is due on 4 December, by 11:59 p.m.**

### **Important Dates:**

- **September 18:** Last day to sign up for F/Y courses on Acorn
- **October 18:** Midterm due
- **November 4:** Last day to drop F courses from academic record and GPA
- **December 4:** Final paper due
- **December 5:** Deadline to request late withdrawal
- **January 10:** Last day to file a petition for fall term work

## **Schedule of Readings:**

Please bring your texts and notes to **every class**, since we will work from them. Please read in advance of class.

All readings beyond the book list are marked with **\*\*** on the syllabus. These are available on our class Quercus site.

### **I. Beginnings**

#### **11 September: Introduction to the course**

- (a) Syllabus review
- (b) Discussion of course themes and goals

#### **18 September: The Plague of Athens and Disaster in Communities (Group A)**

- (a) Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, trans. Steven Lattimore (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1998), Book 2.31-65.\*\*
- (b) Priscilla Wald, *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative*, Introduction and Ch. 1, pp. 1-67
- (c) Paul Slack, *Plague: A Very Short Introduction* (**Strongly recommended but not required!**)

### **II. Theoretical Tools for Thinking about Plague**

#### **25 September: Biopolitics, Populations, and Governance (Group B)**

- (a) Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended, Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), Lecture 11, pp. 239-264.\*\*
- (b) Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population, Lectures at the Collège de France, 1976-1977*, Lectures 1-3 & 5, pp. 1-86 & 115-134.
- (c) Roberto Esposito, *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life*, trans. Zakiya Hanafi (Malden: Polity Press, 2011), Ch. 4, pp. 112-144.\*\* (**Recommended but not required**)

#### **2 October: Risk Perception, Blame, and the Construction of Scapegoats (Group A)**

- (a) Mary Douglas, *Risk and Blame: Essays in Cultural Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1992), Chs. 1, 2, 5 & 6, pp. 3-37 & 83-121.\*\*
- (b) René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1986), ch. 1-3, pp. 1-44.\*\*
- (c) Priscilla Wald, *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative*, Chs. 2 & 5, pp. 68-113 & p. 213-263.

### **III. London's Great Plague Novel: Defoe's *Journal* and Its Sources and Legacies**

#### **9 October: Defoe's *Journal*--Looking Back on the Great Plague (Group B)**

- (a) Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year*

**16 October: The City as Body--Sources and Legacies of Plague in London (Group A)**

- (a) Graham Hammill, "Miracles and Plagues: Plague Discourse as Political Thought," *The Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 10.2 (Fall/Winter 2010): 85-104.\*\*
- (b) Mark Jenner, "Plague on a Page: *Lord Have Mercy Upon Us* in Early Modern London," *The Seventeenth Century* 27.3 (Autumn 2012): 255-286.\*\*
- (c) Erin Sullivan, "Physical and Spiritual Illness: Narrative Appropriations of the Bills of Mortality," in *Representing the Plague in Early Modern England*, eds. R. Totaro & E. Gilman (London: Routledge, 2011): 76-94.\*\*
- (d) Stephanie Boluk and Wylie Lenz, "Infection, Media, and Capitalism: From Early Modern Plagues to Post-Modern Zombies," *The Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 10.2 (Fall/Winter 2010): 126-147.\*\*

**23 October: Film Screening: Deserted London in *28 Days Later* (Group B)**

- (a) *28 Days Later*, dir. Danny Boyle (2002)

**NB:** Response papers will pertain to the film this week, since there is no reading. They will be due by 5 p.m. on Friday, 25 October.

**IV. Plague as Social and Political Metaphor**

**30 October: Plagues, Material and Metaphorical (Group A)**

- (a) Colin Jones, "Plague and Its Metaphors in Early Modern France," *Representations* 53 (Winter 1996), pp. 97-127.\*\*
- (b) Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* and *AIDS and Its Metaphors*

**6 November: Reading week, no class.**

**13 November: Camus, the Plague of Oran, and Resistance (Group B)**

- (a) Camus, *The Plague*

**20 November: Disaster and Humanity in Saramago's *Blindness* (Groups A & B)**

- (a) José Saramago, *Blindness*

**27 November: Future Directions, I**

- (a) Graduate student paper presentations

**4 December: Future Directions, II**

- (a) Graduate student paper presentations